

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Jesse Shera, Librarianship, and Information Science by H. Curtis Wright

Review by: Richard Krzys

Source: *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Winter, 1990), pp. 248-250

Published by: Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40323456>

Accessed: 23-10-2018 06:18 UTC

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common with well-developed nations, as well as the need for standardization, developing countries need to plan for unique situations and find solutions within and specifically for their own societies. India's historical societal class distinctions provide an illustration of this recommendation, as does the extreme poverty of some of the developing countries.

Personnel practices are also emphasized, with writings on collective bargaining and unions, staff training, and growth that is dependent on helping staff cope with change. Some of the familiar harangues are also covered such as the issue of centralization versus decentralization and the question of whether management is an art or a science. Recurring themes are the new increased attention given to planning, and particularly, planning based on adequate information that often involves evaluating service in light of cost effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis.

Because so many of the topics concur with those typically covered in a library management course, this international reader should be on the recommended reading list of a library science graduate course in library management.

Lois Buttler
Kent State University

Wright, H. Curtis. *Jesse Shera, Librarianship, and Information Science*. Occasional Research Paper, 5. Provo, Utah: School of Library and Information Science, Brigham Young Univ., 1988.

Jesse Shera enjoyed a multifaceted career as librarian, researcher, educator, and administrator. Within each role he met numerous individuals upon whom he left a lasting impression. H. Curtis Wright, a former student of Shera's, pays tribute to his mentor through

this occasional research paper that is an expanded version of an article entitled "Shera as a Bridge between Librarianship and Information Science" published in *The Journal of Library History*.

In this sketch for a biography of Shera that lies in the not-too-distant future, Wright presents aspects of Shera's life from his student days at Miami and Yale Universities to his death in Cleveland in 1982. Chapters include "Shera's Professional Development," "Shera's Computer and Machine Exploration," "Bridging the Gap at Western Reserve," "The Schism between Information Science and Librarianship," and a conclusion, followed by an extensive bibliography.

The effects of Shera's background (his back-door entrance into the library profession, educational background, and humanistic orientation) are explored by Wright. He concludes that Shera's academic diversity encouraged him never to give up "his relentless search for a holistic philosophy of librarianship that would tie all of its details and loose ends together."

This holistic philosophy preoccupied Shera and became his obsession after he was appointed dean of Western Reserve University's School of Library Science in 1952. Shera's vision was best expressed in the statements of John Schoff Millis, then president of Western Reserve University, and Margaret Egan. Millis stated, "... if librarianship were to be a profession, it would require a different kind of educational program than the one it had at Reserve—it would require a program with exacting standards, rigorous expectations, a competent faculty, basic research, and fundamental scholarship." And Egan encouraged Shera to accept the Western Reserve deanship, telling him, "This is a chance for you to . . . run your own school and

develop something on [the] line of [documentation, automation, and machines].”

In the chapter “The Schism between Information Science and Librarianship,” Wright discusses Shera’s holistic view of librarianship. According to Shera, “it (the holistic view of librarianship, i.e., its integration with documentation, information retrieval, information science, and special librarianship) is no undifferentiated unity: it constitutes a psychophysical unity of immaterial realities (ideas) and physical instruments (data) in which two great halves interact to create the integrated unity of one great whole. Information science . . . is not antithetical to librarianship. They are children of the same parents.”

To his death in 1982 Shera viewed the computer as only another means for effecting the union, or as he stated, “There is more to information science than the computer; everyone knows that. Still, information science minus the computer is pretty close to nothing.” Shera warned librarians against “becoming punchdrunk from (technology) and forgetting that machines are only so much intricate and spectacular hardware if they are improperly designed for the tasks they are supposed to perform and if their capabilities and limitations . . . are imperfectly understood . . . We are in serious trouble if the means for doing our job becomes the job we are doing. The basic purpose of librarianship is not encompassed in the machine, and there is much more to librarianship than is envisaged in information science.”

As it now stands, this chapter is clear neither in its purpose nor in its points to be made; instead, it presents a plethora of undigested quotations that fail to make clear Shera’s point of view. Wright’s conclusions, commenting on the use by United States librarianship of an

antiquated technology, appear simplistic in their analysis and hastily written.

The remainder of Wright’s occasional paper consists of the following chapters: “The Drawbacks of Information Science,” “The Definition of Information,” “A Choice for Librarians,” “The General Information Problem,” “Symbolic Interactionism,” and “Pragmatism and Anti-Intellectualism.” What Wright has presented here are his preliminary attempts to interpret the complexity, brilliance, and humanity of Jesse H. Shera. If this study is continued, it has the potential to develop into a hero-worshiping biography; and as an intellectually honest historian, Shera would not have appreciated that.

Shera certainly was brilliant. His brilliance consisted partly in his being an “idea man” and partly in his ability to ask the right questions of other brilliant people whom he attracted: Margaret Egan, James Perry, Allen Kent, and Conrad Rawski to name a few. But unfortunately these individuals are not given their just due by Wright when he examines Shera’s accomplishments. For example, Shera admitted to this reviewer that the term “social epistemology” was Margaret Egan’s creation. Most professionals attribute the term to the intellectual inventiveness of Shera.

The study concentrates mainly on the *intellectual* aspects of Shera, but even here the author has difficulty in presenting a true picture of the great library educator. He was an outstanding historian who concentrated on studying the social agency called a public library as Alfred Hessel had studied libraries in general. In addition, to those who were influenced by Shera’s personality, he appeared a complex individual whose scholarship was brilliant. However, rather than the Renaissance cosmopolite portrayed here,

Shera was thoroughly American, as American as Charles Ives or Mark Twain.

What is needed is additional information to make Shera no less intellectual but to render him more human. This great man could be petty, even in print. Investigate his vitriolic and waspish attacks on the writings of Lawrence Clark Powell, whose "bookmanship"—and writing—Shera did not appreciate. This reviewer will always remember fondly an anecdote that illustrates Sera's sense of humor and his ability to seize the moment. While attending an ALA convention in Detroit, the reviewer saw Sera attempt to cross the street in front of the Sheraton Cadillac Hotel at night on his way to deliver an address to a waiting throng. I clutched his arm, and said, "Dean Sera, it's Rich." As we continued across the street, I noticed two essential letters had fallen from the hotel's marquee, which now read "Shera on adillac." In my excitement, I blurted out, "Dean Sera, they've got your name in lights." "What does it say?" he asked. I repeated, "Shera on adillac." Jesse laughed, and that evening he began his talk by announcing, "I'm Jesse Sera, and I'm here to talk to you about my favorite car, the Adillac."

J. Curtis Wright is to be commended for his occasional paper. It is a fascinating study of a complex, brilliant, and humane individual. This reviewer hopes that as Wright continues his research he will utilize oral history and interview techniques together with content analyses of Sera's writings to render this biography more polydimensional and characteristic of Sera's talents as humorist, raconteur, and multi-faceted professional.

Richard Krzys
University of Pittsburgh

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